

Original Article

POWER FANTASIES IN THE ATTENTION ECONOMY: SOLO LEVELING AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPEAL OF ALGORITHMIC MERITOCRACY AMONG DIGITAL YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

The rising popularity of level-up narratives in webtoon and anime among youth, while indicative of a fascination with the fantasy genre, also reflects deeper cultural negotiations with algorithmic systems that structure contemporary digital life. This paper examines Solo Leveling, as a cultural text that embodies the ideological foundation of the modern attention economy. Its popularity across different forms is derived from its world of algorithmic meritocracy as emotionally satisfying and socially legitimate. Central to this narrative is the “System”, a hidden, authoritative system that assesses effort, grants reward and promises upward mobility through quantifiable performance. This paper argues that Solo Leveling offers a fantasy of perfect recognition, where labour is seen, performance is measured and corresponding outcomes are fair. For digital youth living in social media characterized by precarity, invisibility, inconsistent performance metrics and rewards, this narrative provides psychological reassurance. The protagonist rises from a weakling to an overpowered superhuman. This progression functions as algorithmic wish-fulfillment, a desire for a system that fairly converts effort to value.

The analysis highlights how the series privileges individual enhancement over collective action. Emotional connect is created through grind culture, rigorous self-discipline and perseverance, which reinforces meritocratic myth and overlooks structural inequality. This draws on parasocial identification; viewers internalize the struggles as a proxy for their own aspirations within data-driven environment. This study conducts a qualitative textual analysis of crucial narrative arcs within the world of stat screens, rank disclosures and reward notifications as media objects. These are analyzed alongside fan discourse to examine youth perception and affective investment.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Attention Economy, Media Literacy, Algorithmic Ethics, Webtoon, Anime, Solo Leveling

INTRODUCTION

Humans today inhabit a digital life structured by algorithmic systems. These systems classify, rank and predict as well as influence user behavioural patterns. Right from curated social media feeds to recruiting platforms, algorithm-driven mechanisms arrange visibility and opportunities that are typically incomprehensible to users Gillespie (2014) and Striphos (2015). In such an environment, recognition is quantifiable through metrics. These metrics include likes, shares, follower count, engagement rates, views, clicks, impressions, etc. This creates a social order that transforms visibility into currency Goldhaber (1997).

Such transformation has far-reaching implications that are both psychological and cultural in nature. The attention economy transforms social behaviour into quantifiable performance that produces a competitive form of self-optimization as a normative

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condition [Fuchs \(2014\)](#) and [Zuboff \(2019\)](#). Youth navigate digital environments and ecosystems in which identity, popularity and professional lives are mediated by algorithmic assessment [Cotter \(2019\)](#).

In this ecosystem, the South Korean webtoon which was later adapted into an anime, a Japanese animated art form, Solo Leveling, presents an intriguing parallel. The protagonist, Sung Jin-woo starts as a low ranking (the lowest rank for hunters in the story is E) but soon gains access to a hidden computational entity known as “the System”. This “System” monitors his stats, assigns quests to ‘the player’ and rewards progress with measurable updates (such as access to higher level dungeons) or upgrades (more points or items). In this manner, the player’s ascension from low ranking to higher rank is visible, quantifiable and guaranteed. This study examines Solo Leveling as a fictional narrative that resonates with digital youth as it dramatizes the fantasy of algorithmic meritocracy within the framework of attention economy. The webtoon and the anime present an imaginary world where the embedded algorithmic authority is transparent in its rewarding mechanism and outcome. Labour and merit are always recognized and structural barriers, such as hunter classes, can be overcome through relentless optimization, understood in the narrative through the term ‘leveling up.’ This fantasy aestheticizes metrics, presents a legitimate argument for automated governance and reconfigures inequality as corresponding to the input of individual performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of “attention economy” by Herbert A. Simon describes a condition in which attention becomes a scarce resource in an otherwise information-loaded environment [Goldhaber \(1997\)](#). Platforms capitalize and eventually, monetize attention by tracking, predicting and redirecting user behaviour. Visibility in this manner functions as a symbolic and economic capital.

In the context of the digital environment, metrics function as proxies for social standing and worth. Algorithmic amplification acts as public and visible indicators of recognition and reputational capital [van Dijck et al. \(2018\)](#). This produces a competitive social gaming world where users are constantly driven to perform validation [Bucher \(2018\)](#). The narrative of the webtoon presents an interesting paradox mirroring real world digital environments. Systems driven by algorithmic authority are rarely transparent. [Gillespie \(2014\)](#) explains that much like humans in authority, algorithms function as gatekeepers, influencing public discourse behind an invisible garb. This opaque nature enables user agency as complex and enables structural asymmetries. Solo Leveling presents this paradox as the plot progresses while still reinforcing its algorithmic fantasy through the successful reawakening and success of the protagonist.

Algorithmic culture is a term that refers to the significant role of computational systems influencing the production and circulation of culture [Striphas \(2015\)](#). Algorithms determine what content is visibilized and consumed and who gains influence and access to reputational capital. Algorithms operate much like regulatory mechanisms [Gillespie \(2018\)](#). They classify and rank and then proceed to moderate at scale. Their decision-making processes and parameters are mostly opaque and inaccessible to users [Pasquale \(2015\)](#). In the context of Solo Leveling, the System appears to operate in the capacity of an ‘absolute governor’. It monitors and evaluates performance, correspondingly assigns rewards and penalties, and consequently, decides advancement. While its background processing on logic applications for decision-making is shrouded in secrecy, its judgements appear fair and meritocratic. This imitates real-life algorithmic authority while masking its tendency towards bias and errors.

Neoliberal societies motivate individuals to view themselves as entrepreneurial subjects capable of and responsible for self-optimization [Dardot and Laval \(2013\)](#). Success is presented as personal merit in lieu of an outcome of structural privilege. Gamification features intensify this dynamic by converting performance into point-based reward systems. Metrics act as a visible proof of hard work and motivate self-discipline, serving as a reminder of the fruits of continuous and relentless labour. In this manner, the webtoon exemplifies gamified neoliberal structures. Jin-woo progresses through the system through sheer grind, consistency and diligence. He accepts quests, endures pain and optimizes efficiency. He sometimes even creates his own targets surpassing the quota set by the system. Sung Jin-woo levels up ‘alone’ and is the only one in the fictional world of the webtoon who can level up; further evidenced by the actual translation of the Korean title of the series 나 혼자만 레벨업 (translates to ‘Only I Level Up’). Hence, collective struggle is secondary to personal optimization in the story.

Parasocial interaction is central to every discussion in fan studies. The theory notes that viewers and readers develop an emotional connection with characters from pop culture products [Horton and Wohl \(1956\)](#). In the context of digital culture, these emotional bonds extend to transmedia ecosystems [Abidin \(2018\)](#). The protagonist’s trajectory from a weak, overlooked hunter to an overpowered, dominant one imitates the aspirational arc of digital recognition and success. Young audiences, operating in a dynamic, fluctuating algorithmic governance, develop emotional resonance in narratives that present a fantasy of guaranteed upward mobility.

METHODOLOGY

This theoretical study follows a qualitative approach to examine the popular [webtoon \(2018\)](#) and [anime \(2024\)](#) Solo Leveling through the domain of digital media studies, gamification theory, and platform studies. The study focuses on the narrative and visual architecture of the webtoon (written by Chugong, illustrated by Gi So-Ryeong & Jang Sung-Rak) and its anime adaptation (produced by A-1 Pictures). It employs textual and interface analysis to analyze how game mechanic, algorithmic visibility, level-up possibilities,

and digital self-determination of reputation are crucial to the narrative structure. Through interpretive thematic and comparative media analysis, the study posits Solo Leveling within discourses on quantified identity, aspirational productivity and the commodification of personal grind in contemporary digital culture.

ANALYSIS

Unlike real-world algorithms that are often distrusted (but heavily used anyway) and criticized for bias [Noble \(2018\)](#) and opaque mechanisms such as shadow banning, the System in the fictional world of Solo Leveling is presented as infallible. It enforces discipline and rewards merit proportionately. In this first half of the narrative, the System becomes a benevolent algorithm, Jin-woo's opportunity for a second chance when he is nearly killed in the first double dungeon he encounters in the start of the story. The depiction of the system as benevolent however, risks normalising algorithmic authority and governance as ethically neutral. The early chapters establish the protagonist as the lowest and weakest ranking hunter. Other hunters who participate in raids are often seen discussing Jin-woo's reputation as the 'weakest hunter'. Rank in the Solo Leveling world is a metric of worth, mirroring follower or subscriber count, engagement stats in real digital platforms. Rank therefore is identity. Rank is also institutional in the story and not self-determined. Mechanisms and technologies exist to assess hunters and categorize them in ranks through bureaucratic regulations and measurement. This is a parallel to contemporary digital identity formation, where algorithms classify, thereby shaping social perception [Gillespie \(2014\)](#). However, in Jin-woo's case, this alters when he encounters the double dungeon. The encounter presents a moment of algorithmic rupture. The narrative soon introduces, to Jin-woo, a visible player stats screen, health and stamina information, daily quest reminders and reward notifications. This functions as interface logic embedded into narrative ontology where the world is now presented as computational.

Level-up notifications post completion of quests or during crucial battle moments enable narrative climax for readers, viewers and the protagonist alike. Metrics are thereby an additional spectacle itself, visually dramatized, reminding the protagonist and the consumer alike of the omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient authority and benevolence of the system. The pleasure of leveling up through quantification mirrors platform dopamine cycles [Bucher \(2018\)](#). Platform dopamine cycles refer to the addictive, self-perpetuating cycle embedded in digital media platforms, reflective in aspects such as endless scrolling, intermittent rewarding system, contradictory experience of platform cynicism and engagement. Recognition is presented as unambiguous and numerical outcome. The daily quest segments of the narrative are central to the progress of the protagonist. The System imposes mandatory tasks such as number of push-ups, running distance, squat counts and battle modes. Failure to complete the quests results in punishment and completing of the quest requirements enable increase in stats. In this context, ideological frameworks of surveillance (the system monitors compliance), discipline (improvement emerges from routine repetition; the grind) and quantification (hard work translates into quantifiable gain). This is neoliberal self-optimization [Dardot and Laval \(2013\)](#). The narrative presents discipline as empowering and liberating rather than coercive and suffocating. Surveillance is not a harsh imposition of authority but rather benevolent; punishment is not negative but rather, corrective. Unlike algorithms on digital platforms and media, where labour does not necessarily result in rewards [Cotter \(2019\)](#), the System guarantees proportional reward. Algorithmic fairness becomes a fantasy fulfilled in the story.

In terms of meritocratic structures, Solo Leveling does not present a world without social hierarchies. The protagonist's friend, Yoo Jin-ho, while a B rank hunter whose average combat skills are balanced with expensive and flashy gear, is able to leverage his privileged background as the son of Yoojin Construction and Yoojin Guild's CEO to fund his expensive gear and employ management skills to start Ahjin Guild as another hunting enterprise. Yet, Solo Leveling demonstrates through the protagonist that the pinnacle of success is an outcome of personal grind. Structural reform is difficult and barely possible, however. This reinforces the presence of neoliberal meritocracy in the plot [Dardot and Laval \(2013\)](#).

When the protagonist undergoes re-evaluation which reveals his reawakening and S-rank (highest and rare rank for hunters in the story), the scene is presented as an algorithmic revelation. The device used to measure is unable to capture the scope of his abilities. The crowd that gathers outside the Hunter Association's building reacts in wonder. This mirrors the reaction of users on digital platforms depicting spectacle of sudden (viral) recognition, shock at invisible labour made visible (and thus rewarded) followed by immediate recalibration of status. Jin-woo transforms from the 'weakest hunter' to the 'strongest hunter' in the story. This thereby dramatizes a significant issue present in the attention economy: invisibility vs visibility [Goldhaber \(1997\)](#). The narrative reassures viewers that hidden labour will eventually be recognized, rewarded and exalted.

As Jin-woo starts to level up and gain strength, he acquires the ability of a necromancer, to extract shadows of the slain and command them. This introduces automation; he does not fight alone (Go Gun-hee, Head of the Hunter Association, once remarks that Jin-woo contains within himself, an army); he deploys what seems to look like an algorithmically generated army he calls his shadow soldiers. These soldiers do not have to be emotionally negotiated with. They operate purely through command-based logic. Much like their master, they can level up alongside him. This is a classic representation of scalable productivity. However, even as power shifts from mere physical prowess to system-level management, the soldiers are a part of Jin-woo, an extension of his abilities and as they are part of the master who commands them, Jin-woo still, by that logic, fights solo. Jin-woo moves from being a mere warrior-hunter to a platform orchestrator. This parallels digital entrepreneurs who leverage algorithmic amplification in lieu of self-labour.

An important feature of the world of Solo Leveling is the aestheticization of metrics. Stats screens present like a diegetic dashboard but functions symbolically as a quantified self and a self-surveillance tool. This is unlike real-life social media dashboards, where engagement metrics fluctuate unpredictably and are not transparent. The protagonist's stats grow cumulatively. Shadow banning does not exist and neither does arbitrary suppression exist. This kind of stability generates trust in automated authority. Micro climaxes occur as Jin-woo receives notifications of leveling up. This imitates social media notification pings. Bucher (2018) notes that algorithms govern through affect. They generate, within users, anticipation, anxiety and a loop of reward cycles. However, in Solo Leveling, notifications are euphoric. Thus, the absence of algorithmic injustice erases political friction.

CONCLUSION

Solo Leveling is a fantasy of algorithmic justice. It imagines a world where metrics are honest, transparently generated, recognition is guaranteed in proportion to effort and labour and systems are objective, impartial and free from political interference. The mysterious 'System' that selects, disciplines and monitors Jin-Woo functions as an invisible yet omnipresent sovereign. The story dramatizes an imaginary world where sovereignty is decentralized and simultaneously intensified, embedded within code rather than law, and internalized by subjects who willingly participate in their own datafication. For digital youth navigating vague digital infrastructures, this fantasy narrative acts as a psychological utopic reassurance. Yet, by aestheticizing automated governance and obscuring the possibility of structural bias, the narrative framework risks legitimizing black box authority.

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